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CRITICAL LITERACY AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Introduction

Critical literacy is the use of texts to analyse and transform relations of cultural, social and political power. It is part of a longstanding normative educational project to address social, economic and cultural injustice and inequality. It aims towards the equitable development and acquisition of language and literacy by historically marginalized communities and students, and towards the use of texts in a range of communications media to analyse, critique, represent and alter inequitable knowledge structures and social relations of school and society. Different versions of critical literacy have been adopted, used and developed by TESOL educators since the 1980s, leading to an array of pedagogic approaches. They derive a common principle from Paulo Freire (1972): that language teaching and learning is an act of political and cultural power with substantive material and social consequences and possibilities for learners and their communities. The normative premise of this work is that the *telos* of literacy as a human capacity is a will towards freedom, equality and emancipation.

The term 'literacy' traditionally refers to mastery of capabilities in reading and writing print text. With the rapid expansion of new modes of information technology, definitions of literacy have pluralized, expanding to include engagement with a range of semiotic forms. Visual, aural, and digital multimodal texts are now integral to language education, and to literacy education more generally. The cultural, linguistic and educational implications of digitalization are the focus of current research on cultural identity (e.g., Lam, 2004; Harklau, 2003) and on patterns of differential access and stratified educational outcomes along the fault lines of linguistic and cultural difference and social class (e.g., Warschauer & Matuchniak, in press/2010).

Critical literacy approaches view texts – print and multimodal, paper-based and digital - and their codes and discourses as human technologies for representing and reshaping possible worlds. Texts are not taken as part of a canonical curriculum tradition or received wisdom that is beyond criticism. Rather they are conceived of as malleable human designs and artefacts used in social fields. In this regard, critical approaches begin by culturally and historically situating languages and discourses, texts, their authors and readers – bracketing and disrupting their 'natural', given or taken-for-granted authoritative status in institutional and everyday contexts. Texts, then, operate in identifiable social, cultural and political contexts. The aim is to develop learners capable of critiquing and making texts in their cultural and community interests. This involves an understanding of how texts and discourses can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed to represent, contest and, indeed, transform material, social and semiotic relations.

In TESOL, critical approaches have been informed by sociological, ethnographic and applied linguistics research on language policy and education for second language learners. This includes ongoing work on the international spread of English, research on the social and political implications of language education and on educational equity for linguistic and cultural minorities (Pennycook, 1999; Kubota & Lin, 2009). These foci mark a shift from the longstanding search for foundational cognitive and psycholinguistic theories of language acquisition and use, and a turn to a sociological, sociocultural and critical linguistic analysis of how language and texts figure in social power and inequality, agency and identity. Critical approaches to TESOL, then, are premised on upon contemporary analyses of linguistic and textual practice in state, media, corporation, school, religion, family and other institutions.

Current shifts in geopolitical power, global economic crisis are reshaping the development and spread of English as both instrument and commodity, as a form of capital and as a complex sociolinguistic field in globalised cultural and economic exchange (Luke, 2004). Further, new international flows of workers and students, migrants and refugees to English-speaking Western societies are creating complex new demographic and cultural conditions for linguistic and socio-economic inclusion and marginalisation.

Here we ask: What counts as critical TESOL in *these* new complex, contradictory conditions of cultural and economic globalisation? In what follows, we review research on language planning and ideologies and the educational status of linguistic and cultural minorities. These set the generative conditions and analytic grounds for two major approaches to critical TESOL: critical pedagogy and critical text analysis.

Language Policy and Ideologies

Freedom to use one's own language in everyday institutional, civic and cultural life is an inalienable human right (Hymes, 1995). Yet in its postwar genesis, the field of language planning was based on a technocratic approach to policy that treated language as a scientific, technical and ideologically neutral phenomenon (Luke McHoul & Mey, 1992; Pennycook, 2002). The expansion of linguistic and literate competence in a dominant lingua franca was defined in terms of the causal development of human capital, the expansion of scientific/technical capacity, and social and economic advancement (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2000). Technocratic models of language policy did not adequately address complex local histories of colonialism and issues of neo-colonial economic and social conflict (Lin & Martin, 2002). Language ideologies are social class, locational and ethnocentric beliefs about the value and power of specific languages, deployed and shaped in everyday language use (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). While they may begin from scientific analyses of linguistic corpus and status, language policies are bids to reconcile and, in instances, to suture ideological contestation between different social classes, cultural and linguistic communities (Tollefson, 2002a, b). Hegemonic language policies set the conditions for "linguicism" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), exclusionary discrimination on the basis of language in access to power and resources. Where the imposition of English (or other dominant languages) as a medium of instruction is tied to monolingual ideologies and policies, schooling can be a major contributor to first language, vernacular and regional minority language loss.

By this account, the international spread of English via Western curriculum and language teaching methods is a form of “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 1992), generating inequality and benefiting core at the expense of peripheral communities and nations. Within culturally, racially and linguistically diverse English-speaking countries similar processes of “linguistic domination” (Lippi-Green, 1997) occur. “Audible difference” (Miller, 2003) is constructed in education and other social institutions through rejection of non-standard English dialects and ‘accents’, and reluctance of first language speakers to shoulder responsibility for communicating effectively in interactions with language learners (Alim, 2009; Dooley, in press/2010). Indeed, increased and diversified migration to English-speaking countries in recent decades has led to a reassertion of monolingualism in education. There is a renewed emphasis on standard English in UK education (Tollefson, 2002b), continued Official English and anti-bilingual activism in the U.S. (Dicker, 2000; Tollefson, 2002b; Wiley, 2002; Alim, 2009) and a resurgence of English-only policies for Native North Americans, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008). These are bids to establish a bias towards the mainstream standard of fluency with dominant lingua franca, dialect and accent.

Critics of exclusionary language policies have called for educational and civic policies promoting multilingualism, translation and exchange, while increasing non-elite access to English, languages, discourses and registers affiliated with mainstream social and economic power (Phillipson, 2003; Joseph & Ramani, 1998). Phillipson (2003) also argues that it would also include government regulation of market forces that favour English. Critical approaches to TESOL, then, are by definition responses to conflict over language ideology – with blended focus on issues of access to dominant languages, texts and discourses, on the recognition of students’ voices and identities, first and vernacular language rights, and on the development of a critical stance towards linguistic and cultural hegemony in all of its historically pernicious forms.

Educational Equality for Linguistic and Cultural Minorities

A second driving force for critical approaches to TESOL has been inequitable schooling for migrants, refugees and other linguistic minorities. The underperformance of cultural and linguistic minority students is well documented in international comparative analyses (e.g., OECD, 2000). TESOL developed as a field in the context of postwar immigration to the US, UK, Canada and other English-speaking countries. Its historical aims and functions have been ambiguous. It has contributed to the assimilation of minority speakers into mainstream cultures and economies. At the same time, it has been defined as a key educational strategy for equality of educational opportunity, access and participation for linguistic and cultural minorities.

Sociological analyses of educational inequality have focused on how schools and other institutions engage in the intergenerational social, cultural and economic reproduction of class and cultural status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Second language learners’ “cultural capital” of linguistic and cultural resources can act as a disadvantage in mainstream lingua franca education. Structural discrimination in schools works occurs through mechanisms such as streaming and tracking, labelling

and self-fulfilling prophecies, linguistically and culturally-biased assessment (Wong, 2004) and homework assignments that assume access to material, discourse and social resources of mainstream and middle class homes (Dooley, in press/2009). When ESL students do have access to intellectually substantive and critical education, issues can arise as to whether or not mainstream pedagogy is adequate to high level attainment on the part of language learners (Dooley, 2009). This set of challenges raises key questions about the definition and resourcing of TESOL in schools – whether it is viewed as a form of remediation for students who are construed as deficit (Toohey, 2000), and whether, where and how TESOL articulates into mainstream curriculum and instruction.

At the classroom level, a key mechanism of linguistic discrimination is the “misrecognition” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of students’ linguistic competence and cultural resources (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner & Meza, 2003). Working with Puerto Rican families, Compton-Lilly (2007) showed that children enjoyed abundant pro-school social capital with family adults including mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts. Teachers, however, did not recognise or value the cultural or linguistic capital that students brought to school. Stanton-Salazar, Dornbusch and Sanford (1995) describe a similar pattern of social distance and distrust between the students and institutional agents such as teachers, counsellors and high status peers lead to a misrecognition of students’ cultural, social and linguistic resources (cf. Valenzuela, 1999; 2008). Ethnographic and classroom discourse research in Hong Kong has shown that the attitudes and interests, linguistic skills and confidence that privileged students brought to English lessons in a Hong Kong school advantaged them over Cantonese-dominant working class students. For these students, English lessons reproduced and reinforced the students’ cultural capital, subjective anticipation and objective chances of success whereas for their less advantaged peers, English lessons created dilemmas of interest and understanding (Lin, 1999). A similar dynamic is evident in the high school experience of African students who arrived in Australia as refugees with little, nor or severely interrupted schooling (Dooley, in press/ 2010).

Yet even where mainstream schooling and English language teaching leads to inequitable educational outcomes for linguistic minorities – the actual imposition of English generates the conditions for what Erickson (2008) has termed a “paperthin hegemony”. Canagarajah’s (1998) ethnography of learning and teaching in a Sri Lankan classroom focuses on the complex classroom dynamics of cultural/linguistic power. Identities are “multiple, conflictual, negotiated, and evolving” involving the dynamics of resistance and contestation. These studies, and research on African American students learning academic English as a second dialect, Latino and Asian second language learners suggest that resistance and hybrid identities can sometimes be found in ‘third spaces’ in and outside the classroom - for example, in use of L1 for peer relations (Goldstein, 2003), codeswitching, private asides, vernacular emails, and graffiti in textbooks (e.g., Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejada, 1999; Rex, 2003).

Ethnographies of youth culture have documented how youth and adolescents play with diverse languages and language varieties in multiracial, multiracial and transcultural contexts (Alim, 2009). Outside of classrooms, youth appropriate and use English in often unpredictable, idiosyncratic ways to build identity, affiliation and

cultural practice (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2001; Pennycook & Mitchell, 2009). In spite of attempts by schools and other institutions to normalise language use, this leads to linguistic creolisation, new uses of local vernaculars, and the exploration of emergent genres and blended modalities of expression (Lam, 2004; Hull, Zacher & Hibbert, 2009). The emergence of a transnational, but highly localised Hip Hop culture documents the complex practices of blending and invention, fashioned around a non-standard countercultural dialect of English. Both in schools and broader community life, TESOL students develop resources and identities outside of the formal curriculum, with potential applications for critical literacy and language teaching.

Mainstream schooling, then, creates a site for contestation over language and cultural resources with tensions between mainstream L2 and L1, institutional structure and learner agency, between linguistic/cultural reproduction and student resistance. In English-dominated educational systems, TESOL remains a key curriculum strategy for ameliorating educational disadvantage. Yet the evidence suggests that mainstream schools and classrooms continue to undervalue and misrecognise first language competence and cultural difference as deficit. At the same time, studies of linguistic and cultural minority learners also document the emergence of student and teacher agency, characterised by emergent forms of identity and blended expression (Kubota & Lin, 2008). Critical approaches to TESOL attempt to shift the balance of conventional TESOL, focusing on the enfranchisement of the lifeworlds and voices of students' communities and cultures and a direct engagement with codes and texts of power.

Critical Pedagogy Approaches

Paulo Freire's seminal work on critical education has been extended to the educational project of "critical pedagogy" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Darder, 1992). Freire's work draws from Marx a classical view of ideology: that ruling class ideology dominates what counts as school knowledge and ideology. By this view, approaches to literacy are expressions of dominant ideology, and succeed in creating a literacy that is principally receptive, involved in the passive transmission, decoding and reproduction of dominant and distorted views of the world. The alternative is to begin from learners' key problems, world views and 'namings' of the phenomenal world, in effect turning them into teachers and inventors of the curriculum. This entails an agentive 'renaming' of the world, a decoding and recoding of meaning. The focus is on ideology critique: exposing, second guessing and reconstructing dominant versions of the world provided in literature, textbooks and everyday texts and utterance. By degrees, this orientation runs through all approaches to critical literacy, but it features most strongly in explicitly political approaches to "critical pedagogy" (McLaren & Lankshear, 2004).

The explicit focus on critical analysis and normative transformation of dominant ideologies and material conditions is central to literacy campaigns initiated by Freire and colleagues in Brazil and Mozambique (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987) and it is the focus of current efforts at an explicitly political pedagogy in countries like Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and elsewhere (e.g., Jennings & Da Matta, 2009). There the analysis of the effects of colonialism, imperialism, class division, multinational

corporatism and unequal economic relations is a principal theme of literacy instruction. In Freirian terms, this entails working with learners to use language to name and 'problematicise' the world; that is, to take everyday ideological constructions of social relations, of class, race, gender relations, and to make them problematic through dialogue. In such a setting traditional authority and epistemic knowledge relations of teachers and student are shifted. Learners become teachers of their everyday understandings and experiences, and teachers becoming learners of these same contexts. In school classrooms, dialogic pedagogy might entail establishing student voice and democratic conditions for authentic exchange around issues of moral, social and cultural significance (Edelsky, 1992). In culturally diverse communities, dialogue might also be used as an approach to community-school relations, enabling immigrant parents and mainstream teachers to negotiate conflicting pedagogic beliefs, and teachers to reflect on their ideological stance and position of dominance in home-school relationships (Li, 2006). In adult migrant education, the approach encourages adults to investigate their own literacy practices, analyse how their capabilities and sense of possibilities have been shaped and constrained by cultural and linguistic ideologies, and decide on their own purposes in language and literacy studies (Auerbach, 2002; Boudin, 2002).

Practical critical approaches to TESOL advocated for English language learners in US schools and universities start from a focus on community relations or political events, moving towards agentive, alternative analyses (e.g., Vasquez, 2004; Hones, 1999). In schools and universities, these approaches also focus student reading and writing on community study, the analysis of social movements, and political activism (e.g., Kumishiro & Ngo, 2005). For high school-aged ESL students, skills development for activism might include training in public speaking and translation for public meetings, student journalism, and participation in student government and clubs. Elementary ESL students might be involved in projects with investigative, advocacy and community service components on environmental and other local issues (Wong, 2004; Chang, 2009; Vasquez, 2004). These approaches have also extended to include a focus on critical "media literacy", the analysis of popular cultural texts including advertising, news, broadcast media and the internet. TESOL teacher education programs have developed to engage teachers as community activists (Major & Celedon-Pattichis, 2001). Recently, similar principles have been proposed for promoting activism about local issues through English language studies in non-English-speaking countries (Akbiri, 2008b).

In the 1990s, feminist scholars argued that critical pedagogy did not adequately consider issues of epistemic and gendered standpoint. In everyday practice, there is a parallel risk of pedagogic imposition given the complex forms of gendered and raced voice and power, identity and subjectivity at work in the interactional contexts of classrooms and cultural circles (Luke & Gore, 1991). This analysis has been extended to the relations of gender and culture between critical pedagogy theorists, and TESOL academics and their students in East Asia – most of whom are female and second language speakers (Lin, 1999). These critiques have had a major impact on critical pedagogy. In Australia and Canada, approaches to school reading entail a critique of textual, visual and media representations of women and girls as ideological and patriarchal, that is, as projecting dominant constructions of gender and sexuality and inequitable patterns of face-to-face interaction (Ellsworth, 1991).

A parallel development drawing upon postcolonial and critical race theory has been a renewed stress on issues of 'voice' in the classroom, an orientation towards recognitive justice and the representation of cultures, histories and identities (Moje & Luke, in press/2010). American approaches to critical literacy have developed a strong focus on the "politics of voice" (Kumishiro & Ngo, 2007; Nieto et al. 2008), on building interaction and textual focus around the distinctive cultural histories, identities and contexts faced by groups marginalized on the basis of difference of gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation. The aim is to give voice to ESL students who have been historically silenced, and to encourage the formation of new social identities, and the expression of alternative epistemologies (Wong, 2004; Toohey & Norton, 2002). The assumption is that these can be translated into forms of self-determination, agency and social movement (e.g., Darder, 2002).

Text analytic approaches

Research on the social contexts and practices of literacy demonstrates the cultural and social, cognitive and linguistic complexity in the development and acquisition of literacy (e.g., Pahl & Rowsell, 2004). This raises two substantive educational challenges for critical pedagogy. First, it is largely synchronic, without a broader template for developmental acquisition and use. Second, it lacks specificity in terms of how teachers and students can engage with the specialised and complex structures of texts. These are crucial issues in the development of critical approaches to TESOL. The acquisition of language, text and discourse requires the developmental engagement with levels of linguistic and discourse complexity (e.g., Lemke, 1996). Later models of critical literacy, particularly those developed in Australia and the UK, attempt to come to grips with these key theoretical and practical issues (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1998).

An initial major critique of critical pedagogy was that it overlooked the pressing need for students to master a range of textual genres, including those scientific forms that constitute powerful understandings of the physical and material world (Halliday & Martin, 1995). This position was part of a more general recognition of the social class and culture-specific effects of progressive and student-centred language and literacy pedagogies (Delpit, 1996; Bernstein, 1990). The focus of this work is on explicit access to dominant language and discourse structures.

The mastery of genre entails a grasp of the social functions of lexical and syntactic functions, and an understanding of the relationships of these with affiliated discourses and ideologies (Hasan & Williams, 1996). Equitable access to how texts work, an essential component to redistributive justice, cannot be achieved through an exclusive focus on 'voice' or ideology critique. Genre approaches, then, argue for explicit instruction, direct access and conscious control over "Secret English" and "genres of power" (Halliday & Martin, 1995) .

Genre models have had a significant impact on TESOL in Australia and the UK. The emphasis on scaffolded, explicit instruction in dominant texts has been augmented with a focus on "critical language awareness" (Fairclough, 1990). While it is assumed that as control of genres is a necessary basis for analysis and critique of text, the lead time for critical engagement on the part of ESL students is necessarily long (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). Further there remain

unresolved issues about what balance of direct access to canonical and culturally significant text forms and critique might constitute an enfranchising and activist approach to critical literacy (Luke, 1996). This is of particular importance given concerns about the privileging of elitist Western forms of expression over non-standard, non-Western forms (Gadd, 1998).

The melding of explicit instruction in genre and principles of ideology critique has been a crucial move in the development of models of critical TESOL. The adoption of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough & Wodak, 1996) for pedagogic purposes has been a central move in the development of text analytic approaches. CDA is committed to social change through human agency in the use of language (Janks, 1999). It begins from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994), making broad distinctions between ideological formations in texts (field: representational function), their social functions (tenor: relational functions), and their distinctive generic and modal features (mode: textual functions). The principal is that lexico-grammatical choices are socially and culturally shaped and ideologically implicated in the wider social order (Wallace, 2003).

The aim is detailed textual analyses that denaturalise ideologies in texts, showing how they are related to relations of power that systematically advantage some groups over others (Janks, 1999). Pedagogically, the focus is on making the ideological work of language an object of conscious awareness, bring together ideology critique with an explicit instructional focus on teaching how texts work ideologically (Fairclough, 1990). This entails teaching students the analysis of a range of texts – functional, academic, literary – attending to their lexico-grammatical structure, their ideological contents and discourses, and their identifiable conditions of production and use. The framework of field, tenor and mode enables teachers and students to focus on what texts say, that is, how words, grammar and discourse choices shape a representation or ‘version’ of the material, natural and sociopolitical worlds. It also enables a focus on what texts ‘do’, that is, how words and grammar attempt to establish relations of power between authors and readers, speakers and addressees. Finally, it enables a critical engagement with social fields where texts are used, by whom, in whose interests.

Critical literacy – by this account – entails the developmental engagement by learners with the major texts, discourses and modes of information in the culture. It attends to the ideological and hegemonic functions of texts, as in critical pedagogy models. But it augments this by providing students with categories and procedures for analyzing how texts work, and how they might be manipulated otherwise by authors and readers. For example, this might entail the analysis of a textbook or media representation of political or economic life.

Wallace (2002, 2003) has developed the critical text analytic approach for UK university-level academic English studies. The object of this application is access to ‘literate’ or ‘powerful’ English in preparation for participation in the widest possible community of users of English. Distinguishing everyday conversational language from literate language and knowledge, the approach bridges local texts and practices with regional, national and global discourses and practices. In the first phase, students acquire critical awareness of literacies through ethnographies in their British homestays. In the second phase they build critical interpretations of particular texts

through detailed textual analysis. Finally, they apply what has been learnt to practices and relations of the wider social context.

In South Africa and Australia, Janks and Comber (2006) have developed critical text analytic curriculum for children, many second language and dialect speakers, living in contexts of extreme, spatialised poverty. South African and Australian classes produced and exchanged picture alphabet books to 'tell about here to others who are there'. The project sought to make new resources available to students that would teach them about agency and transformative power. Informed by a focus on the transformative design of discourse (Kress, 2003), the project moved from critical analysis of texts produced by others to student redesign of texts to best represent their worlds (cf. Millard, 2006).

Other critical approaches have linked explicit study of language with issues of social identity and power relations (cf. Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000; Ibrahim, 1999). Working with Chinese migrant students Morgan (1997, 2004) focused on issues of subjectivity through phonological patterns and modality. The project looked at how intonation and modality constituted particular gendered and cultured selves in texts and how this connected with student experience. Alim (2009) describes critical Hip Hop language pedagogies that build student metalinguistic awareness of sociolinguistic variation, patterns in their own use of language varieties, lexical innovations in Hip Hop culture, and the unique words of BL. Students conduct fieldwork to learn about linguistic profiling, that is, linguistic discrimination based on inferences about race, geographic origin, gender, class and sexuality made from speech. The aim in these and other programs is to move beyond a celebration of personal experience to critical engagement with students' knowledge, to both valorise and interrogate student voice (Ibrahim, 2009).

Towards Critical Literacies

The educational project of critical literacy is focused on the goal of social justice for marginalized and disenfranchised communities, in emergent, postcolonial settings and in postmodern, urbanized societies. This involves twin goals of redistributive and recognitive social justice (Fraser, 1998): that is, a focus on (1) the more equitable achievement of conventionally defined language and literacy acquisition and use and on (2) shifts in the dominant ideological contents, social and economic fields and uses of literacy under study. There is, then, a dual orientation towards a more equitable distribution of textual and discourse resources among learners and towards the critique of ideology, culture, political systems and inequitable material conditions. This tension runs across the approaches to TESOL we have described here, balancing a commitment to shared and equitable access to how high-stakes texts and discourses work with the project of critically unpacking and transforming material conditions and social relations of political economy, institutional and everyday life.

Models of critical literacy have followed diverse theoretical lines of development (e.g., feminism, critical race theory, postmodern cultural studies, postcolonialism, critical linguistics) moving well beyond its dialectical materialist foundations in critical pedagogy. These developments have been in response to new social movements, profound shifts in the cultural and linguistic demographics of nations, new conditions

of capitalism and political economy, and the emergence of new technological modes of information. They also are evidence of several decades of practical work at bringing critical literacy into schools and classrooms. But, as noted here, the focus necessarily has shifted from critical analysis of traditional texts and genres to encompass a broad array of texts from media, popular culture, and everyday consumption and work. At the same time, the purview of ideology critique has expanded beyond a focus on political structure, to include a more general critique of dominant institutions of language, media, corporation and economy (Luke, Luke & Graham, 2007).

Literacy is in transition – with the emergence of new technologies, modes of information, and media of instruction presenting major challenges to print and oral traditions of schooling, the state, media and everyday life. The result has been a pluralisation of ‘literacy’ into multiple ‘literacies’ (e.g. New London Group, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Accordingly, there are contending and multiple versions of ‘critical literacy’ at play in the fields of second language education, and in the traditional curriculum fields of language education more generally: language arts, writing and composition, literature study, ‘other’ language study (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008) – as well as in emergent curriculum fields: media study, cultural studies, design, and the other areas of the digital/creative economies.

Is there a unified or singular approach to critical to TESOL education? To answer this question requires that we return to the foundational historical materialism of Freire’s project. The approaches to critical TESOL and literacy that we have described here are themselves historically produced and culturally situated. That is, they are activist interventions by students and teachers, teacher educators, scholars and researchers to disrupt and redress specific conditions of educational inequality, political disenfranchisement, linguistic and cultural marginalisation, social and economic injustice. Each is based on a situated ‘reading of the world’ and a set of assumptions about what is to be done. It would be spurious to adjudge them on lofty theoretical and narrow empirical grounds. Each should be viewed in terms of transformative effects: whether and how they generated literacies that altered communities’ critical analyses and action in the world and their material and social relations, individually and collectively, developmentally and longitudinally. The last three decades of work have demonstrated that TESOL teachers have the political commitment, professional expertise and institutional space to shift language curriculum and pedagogy in new normative directions. Whether and how critical approaches can make substantive differences in the cultural understandings, socioeconomic pathways, and political engagement and agency of second language learners is the outstanding question.

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